New York Theatre Critics' Reviews *1949*

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1949 PRODUCTIONS

Premiers in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

Stage Play	*Page*
1948 Vol.	
*Anne of the Thousand Days	128
*As the Girls Go	159
Don't Listen, Ladies	100
*Edward, My Son	214
*Goodbye, My Fancy	152
*Inside U.S.A.	279
Jenny Kissed Me	112
*Kiss Me, Kate	91
*Lend an Ear	122
*Life With Mother	182
*Light Up the Sky	148
*Love Life	201
*Madwoman of Chaillot (The)	104
Make Mine Manhattan	382
Make Way for Lucia	115
*Mister Roberts	338
My Romance	186
Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!	108
*Private Lives	209
Rape of Lucretia (The)	95
*Red Gloves	132
*Silver Whistle (The)	139
Small Wonder	244
Summer and Smoke	205
*Where's Charley?	197
Young and Fair (The)	143
1947 Vol.	
*High Button Shoes	304
*Streetcar Named Desire (A)	249
1946 Vol.	
Annie Get Your Gun	382
*Born Yesterday	466
1944 Vol.	
Harvey	95

Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 14, 1949

1949 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1949

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
*All for Love	377
*Along Fifth Avenue	392
*Death of a Salesman	358
*Diamond Lil	369
*Forward the Heart	374
Leaf and Bough	381
*My Name Is Aquilon	362
*Richard III	365
Shop at Sly Corner (The)	386
Smile of the World (The)	396

Theatre Openings

"Richard III" 'Diamond Lil"

"My Name Is Aquilon"

"Death of a Salesman"

Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 14, 1949

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN — NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM

NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS — NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS — NEW YORK TIMES

NEW YORK MIRROR — NEW YORK SUN

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"Death of a Salesman"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
FEBRUARY 11, 1949

= By HOWARD BARNES =

A Great Play Is Born

A GREAT play of our day has opened at the Morosco. "Death of a Salesman," by Arthur Miller, has majesty, sweep and shattering dramatic impact. As it has been staged by Elia Kazan and consummately performed by Lee J. Cobb, Arthur Kennedy, Mildred Dunnock and all their associates, it is a soaring tragedy. There is always pertinence to this tale of a defeated old drummer coming to the dead end of his career. A terrible documentation has been leavened with bursts of wild humor and more than one moment of touching grandeur, while the fluent scenes build inexorably to the climax. With Jo Mielziner's inspired setting and lighting, the offering is theater of the first order.

* * *

Miller is no novice at dramaturgy, his "All My Sons" having won a Critics Circle Award, but he has grown enormously in artistic stature since that earlier play. There is lucidity, eloquence and deep feeling in "Death of a Salesman" which makes it far more than a good job of craftsmanship. The story of Willy Loman, who lived for a strange dream and tried to have it realized by a worthless son, while destroying the boy, has its roots deep in the complex structure of contemporary existence. The author has attacked his theme relentlessly. But he has had the gift to give his work exaltation as well as tragic meaning. The gradual disintegration of the salesman is the core of the drama, yet it has a multitude of facets.

The title is superbly explicit. The action opens as a sixty-three-year-old drummer covering the New England territory starts to lose his grip and realizes that little lies have led him to destruction. Through a singularly effective flash-back device Miller has stripped Willy Loman almost shockingly naked. The man's consuming devotion to a son; his genuine lover of a staunch wife, and even an affair with a barmaid in a Boston hotel, are revealed with economy and an infinite variety of situations. There is much talk in "Death of a Salesman," but it comes from the heart to touch the heart of a beholder.

* * *

Cobb contributes a mammoth and magnificent portrayal of the central character. In his hands the salesman's frustration and final suicide are a matter of tremendous import. With a vast range of gesture and diction, he gives Willy a curious stature in his downfall. Kennedy plays the son, on whom a father rested all his lost hopes, with a savage intensity, combining with Cobb to build up the suspense of a subjective melodrama. Miss Dunnock is vastly appealing as Mrs. Loman and Cameron Mitchell is excellent as the second son of the family, who has a way with tarts. Thomas Chalmers appears in scenes where the drummer has lost touch with reality, as an older brother who went to Alaska to make his fortune, and Howard Smith is wonderful as the jesting Charley, who tries unsuccessfully to aid a shocked and disillusioned old man. The others in the company never falter. "Death of a Salesman" is a play to make history.

'DEATH OF A SALESMAN'

Play by Arthur Miller; staged by Elia Kazan; setting and lighting by Jo Mielziner; incidental music composed by Alex North; costumes by Julia Sze; presented by Kermit Bloomgarden and Walter Fried at the Morosco Theatre, February 10, 1949. The cast:

Willy Loman.....Lee J. Cobb
Linda.....Mildred Dunnock
Happy.....Cameron Mitchell
Biff.....Arthur Kennedy
Bernard.....Don Keefer
The Woman..Winnifred Cushing
Charley.....Howard Smith
Uncle Ben....Thomas Chalmers
Howard Wagner.....Alan Hewitt
Jenny.....Ann Driscoll
Stanley.....Tom Pedi
Miss Forsythe..Constance Ford
Letta.....Hope Cameron

Synopsis: The action of the play is in two parts. It takes place in Willy Loman's house-its bedrooms, kitchen, basement, front porch and back yard, and in various offices and places he visits in New York City and Boston today.

Journal American
FEBRUARY 11, 1949

Audience Spellbound By Prize Play of 1949

By ROBERT GARLAND

Here's my true report that, yesterday at the Morosco, the first-night congregation made no effort to leave the theatre at the final curtain-fall of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman." It's meant to make known to you the prevailing emotional impact of the new play by the author of "All My Sons."

As a theatre reporter I'm telling you how that first-night congregation remained in its seats beyond the final curtain-fall. For a period somewhat shorter than it seemed, an expectant silence hung over the crowded auditorium. Then, believe me, tumultuous appreciation shattered the hushed expectancy.

It was, and will remain, one of the lasting rewards that I, as a professional theatregoer, have received in a long full life of professional theatregoing. In "Death of a Salesman," Arthur Miller had given that first night congregation no ordinary new play to praise, to damn, or to ignore.

This, his most iconoclastic composition, is not easy on its congregation, first-night or later on. In writing what he wants to write, he has asked—demanded, rather—your sympathy as a fellow member of the bedeviled human race and your attention as an intelligent collaborator as well.

These, with everything else that's good, the author of "Death of a Salesman" received wholeheartedly last night. The play's playwright and playgoers were worthy of each other.

* * *

Much of Everyman

If Everyman will forgive me, in Arthur Miller's Salesman there's much of Everyman. Bothered, bewildered, but mostly bedeviled, as Willy Loman is, he's not a great deal different from the majority of his contemporaries. He, even as you and I, builds himself a shaky shelter of illusion.

You've the author's word that the motif of "Death of a Salesman" is the growth of illusion in even the most commonplace of mortals. In Willy Loman, the illusionist of the title, the individual is destroyed. And his progeny, Biff and Happy, are wrecked upon the rocks of reality.

Willy has created an image of himself which fails to correspond with Willy Loman as he is. According to the playwright, its the size of the discrepancy that matters. In Salesman Loman, the discrepancy is so great that it finally slays him. Ironically, by his own unsteady hand.

In "Death of a Salesman," the present and the past of Willy Loman exist concurrently—the "stream of consciousness" idea—until they collide in climax. Isn't it true that the Willy Lomans of this world are their own worst tragedy? At the Morosco, only Linda Loman can forsee the end.

And she, as wife and mother, is powerless to prevent it. This, to me, is the play's most tragic tragedy. She, too, is the play's most poignant figure. Not soon shall I forget her!

* * *

Dunnock Is Superb

Forget Linda Loman, I mean, as Mildred Dunnock recreates her. For it is she, first as created by Mr. Miller, then as recreated by Miss Dunnock, whose all-too-human single-mindedness holds "Death of a Salesman" together. She, of all the Lomans, sees the Salesman as he is. And loves him!

Even so, the Salesman of Lee J. Cobb is a tour de force. In a part that's longer than Hamlet and almost as open to misinterpretation, Mr. Cobb is as right as he's resourceful. As Willy Loman, he manages to test your patience and break your heart. Frequently, both at the same time.

His boys—Biff and Happy—are sturdily three-dimensional as projected by Arthur Kennedy and Cameron Mitchell. And, as Charley, Howard Smith brings reality into the Lomans' illusory household. The others could scarcely be improved upon as neighbors, friends and ladies of the evening.

Although Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" is programmed with Kermit Bloomgarden and Walter Fried as co-producers, it's also billed as Elia Kazan's production. You know what that means! And Jo Mielziner's high-flung imaginative setting is exactly what the playwright, the play and players call for...

Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" at the Morosco is my personal prize-play of the 1948-1949 New York season. Here and now, I beat the Pulitzer people and the Critics' Circle to it.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
FEBRUARY 11, 1949

'Death of a Salesman' A Powerful Drama

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

Arthur Miller, who was revealed as a "promising" playwright in his successful "All My Sons" a couple of seasons ago, reaches fulfillment as a dramatist of individuality and power in "Death of a Salesman," which had its eagerly-awaited opening at the Morosco last night. Gone is Mr. Miller's rather labored obeisance to Ibsen, and in its place is a definite quality of his own, a kind of cold intellectual clarity mixed with simple and unashamed emotional force. Under Elia Kazan's vigorous and perceptive direction, "Death of a Salesman" emerges as easily the best and most important new American play of the year.

Its title has the virtue not only of being striking and provocative, but of telling forthrightly what the drama is about. Mr. Miller is describing the last days of a man who is forced to face the terrible fact that he is a failure, that his vague success ideal has crumbled, and that his sons, on whose respect and admiration he had counted, have only contempt for him. With the utter collapse of his world, there is nothing for him to do but die. The story is as simple as that, and there is such truth in it that it is hard to see how any sensitive playgoer of mature years can fail to find something of himself in the mirror it holds up to life.

Social Criticism

Only the most fatuous observer could think of "Death of a Salesman" as a propaganda play, and yet it manages to go deeply enough into contemporary values to be valid and frightening social criticism. Mr. Miller looks upon the salesman ideal of success with an angry but discerning eye, and he sees its hollowness and its treachery. Poor Willy Loman, who thought that, for a successful salesman, popularity and good fellowship were all, and tried to teach his sons what he believed was his wisdom, is a completely credible victim of a prevailing code, as the encroachment of old age destroys its shabby plausibility.

To the telling of his painful story, the playwright brings a direct, unadorned and starkly effective prose style that has nothing fancy, mystic or studiously poetic about it. Yet, with all its realism, "Death of a Salesman" is by no means simply a realistic play. While its action covers the last two days of the protagonist's life, it ranges back and forth through his past, and it does so with a stream-of-consciousness technique which might have been ornate but is managed with no suggestion of pretentiousness. Set down with frank emotion, the new play is, I suspect, something to make strong men weep and think.

Lee J. Cobb

The long, difficult and rewarding central role is played with skill and power by Lee J. Cobb, always an actor of unusual intelligence and skill. Excellent as he is in the part, there is one perhaps paradoxical thing about Mr. Cobb's performance. Because he plays with such emotional strength, he is somehow less deeply moving than he might otherwise have been, since the strength of his acting is transferred to the character he acts, and Willy Loman assumes a personal force that keeps him from being quite the pathetic failure the author made him. Far more heart-breaking is the always admirable Mildred Dunnock as his fine, tragic wife.

All of the performances are skillful. Arthur Kennedy, one of the best of the younger actors, is particularly notable as the older son, who is his father's most tragic failure. The younger son is excellently played by Cameron Mitchell, and, as usual, Howard Smith is first-rate as an understanding neighbor. Alan Hewitt has an impressive scene as a heartless boss, and Don Keefer is fine as the neighbor's successful son. Tom Pedi has an effective bit as a bartender. There must be a word, too, for the rightness of the set Jo Mielziner has devised. "Death of a Salesman" is a play not easily to be forgotten.

New York World-Telegram
FEBRUARY 11, 1949

'Death of a Salesman' Powerful Tragedy

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Death of a Salesman" is a play written along the lines of the finest classical tragedy. It is the revelation of a man's downfall, in destruction whose roots are entirely in his own soul. The play builds to an immutable conflict where there is no resolution for this man in this life.

The play is a fervent query into the great American competitive dream of success, as it strips to the core a castaway from the race for recognition and money.

The failure of a great potential could never be so moving or so universally understandable as is the fate of Willy Loman, because his complete happiness could have been so easy to attain. He is an artisan who glories in manual effort and can be proud of the sturdy fine things he puts together out of wood and cement.

The Path of 'Success.

At 18 he is introduced to the attention he might receive and the financial vistas he might travel by selling on the road. This original deception dooms him to a life of touring and a habit of prideful rationalization, until at 60 he is so far along his tangent that his efforts not to admit his resultant mediocrity are fatal.

Through most of this career runs the insistent legacy of "amounting to something" on his adopted terms, which he forces on his favorite son. With indulgent adoration he unbalances the boy, demanding a mutual idolatry which he himself inevitably fails. If young Biff steals, it is courage. If he captains a football team, the world is watching.

In the end, after repeated failure, Biff sees the truth, too late to really penetrate his father's mind. The boy's tortured efforts to explain his own little true destiny can only crack open the years-long rift, and the salesman, with all his dream's lost shadows, has no alternative to death for his peace.

Beyond Time, Space.

Often plays have been written that crossed beyond physical actuality into the realm of memory and imagination, but it is doubtful if any has so skillfully transcended the limits of real time and space. One cannot term the chronology here a flashback technique, because the transitions are so immediate and logical.

As Willy's mind wavers under the strain of his own failure and the antagonism of his boy, he recalls the early hopeful days. The course of the play runs so smoothly that it seems one moment the two sons have gone to bed upstairs in plain sight, weary and cynical, and an instant later they are tumbling in youthful exuberance to the tune of their father's delighted flattery.

A Tragic Symphony.

Sometimes Willy recalls the chance he once had to join his rich adventurous brother, and as his desperation increases he begs Ben for some explanation of his deep confusion.

These illuminations of the man are so exquisitely molded into the form of the play that it sweeps along like a powerful tragic symphony. The actors are attuned to the text as if they were distinct instruments. Themes rise and fade, are varied and repeated. Again as in music, an idea my be introduced as a faint echo, and afterwards developed to its fullest part in the big scheme.

A Subtle Journey.

It is hard to imagine anyone more splendid than Lee J. Cobb is as Willy Loman, the salesman. To be big and broken is so contradictory. The actor subtly moves from the first realizations of defeat, into a state of stubborn jauntiness alternating with childlike fear in a magnificent portrait of obsolescence.

Only the rare young actor can sustain a role of hysterical intensity with any dignity, but Arthur Kennedy does it with the utmost taste and strength. It is a complicated role, now joyous, now bitter, sometimes surly then passionately outspoken. Kennedy rings these changes without faltering.

Willy's wife Linda is a truthfully blocked out character, gentle and delicate, yet fiercely loving and fiercely loyal.

Mildred Dunnock plays her with sincerity that comes only with surface simplicity and penetrating comprehension. The scenes where she defends and explains the father to her sons are done with heart ringing reality.

Daily Mirror

FEBRUARY 11, 1949

'Death of a Salesman' Is Emotional Dynamite

By ROBERT COLEMAN

An explosion of emotional dynamite was set off last evening in the Morosco by producers Kermit Bloomgarden and Walter Fried. In fashioning "Death of a Salesman" for them, author Arthur Miller and director Elia Kazan have collaborated on as exciting and devastating a theatrical blast as the nerves of modern playgoers can stand.

The new arrival is composed of essentially the same materials used by the Greek tragedians of the Golden Age. It gains power as it progresses. It moves relentlessly to its inevitable conclusion. It stirred the first night audience so deeply that sobs were heard throughout the auditorium, and handkerchiefs were kept busy wiping away tears.

"Death of a Salesman" has to do with an ineffectual father who lives in a dream world and refuses to face reality. He convinces himself that he is an extraordinary man and that his two sons will be paragons of achievement. And in his fatuous way, he fails to prepare the sons for the careers he has mapped out for them.

However, one son, with a mixture of affection and cruelty, sees and exposes the father for what he is. He then determines to salvage something from his wasted life. He has always hated the sham of the big city, the bluster of the go-getter, and he decides that his future lies in the clean air of the Western outdoors. To make this possible, the father, in deep love, takes his own life.

The cast is magnificent. It is difficult to single out its members for individual praise. Lee J. Cobb plays the back-slapping, self-deluding drummer superbly. His performance is a tremendously effective blend of shabby vigor and groping frustration.

Mildred Dunnock, as the salesman's wife, etches a fitting companion piece with admirable, contrasting restraint. She realizes a characterization beautiful in its drabness and absorbing because of its marvelous control.

Arthur Kennedy and Cameron Mitchell make exceptionally fine contributions as the sons whose happiness is sacrificed to their father's goal of material success. Appreciative salutes also are due Howard Smith, Thomas Chalmers, Alan Hewitt, Don Keefer, Winifred Cushing and Tom Pedi.

Jo Mielziner has designed a setting that handsomely meets the requirements of the play. It is atmospheric, imaginative, and obviates frequent scene changes that might cripple the surge of Miller's script.

Take our advice, and rush to the Morosco early this morning to purchase tickets for "Death of a Salesman." Should you delay, you're going to have to wait to obtain them. For, in our opinion, Miller has written not only a distinguished play but a terrific hit. P. S. Don't forget to take along a plentiful supply of handkerchiefs. You will have a hard heart, indeed, if you don't use them when you see it.

The Sun

FEBRUARY 11, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

Triumph at the Morosco.

Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman," exhibited last evening at the Morosco, is the most powerful and most exciting play that the season has revealed to date. A merciless and withering drama, it is packed with intensity and genuine theater. Elia Kazan has staged it magnificently.

Playwright Miller, whose stature as a dramatist is now immeasurably increased, presents a searching examination of the life of a little man and of his relationship with his family. He does so with vivid and beautiful writing in a series of scenes, some of which are numbing in sheer power.

This new play by the author of "All My Sons" has pathos, pitilessness, violence, tenderness, humor and vehemence. It is done with a minimum of scenery and props—Jo Mielziner's cut-out of a house is wieldy and extraordinarily imaginative—and it is superbly played by a cast that the brilliant Kazan has put to work upon the Morosco's stage.

"Death of a Salesman" depicts, with flashbacks bringing forth episodes out of the past, the crack-up, the descent into the ashcan, and the physical, moral and mental disintegration of Willy Loman, popular salesman, who roamed all of a friendly New England for his territory.

The buyers liked Willy. He was welcome everywhere. They gave him orders whether they had them or not. His commissions were large and he had the money to make payments on his house, to pay his insurance, to keep his boys in school, and to prepare Biff, football hero, for his college years. Willy got along.

But at 63, as the play opens—it covers twenty-four hours in his life, his last day on earth—Willy is through. His friends have died, the big stores have changed their personnel, and everything is now cold and mechanical and systematized. The personal touch is gone; friendliness has vanished, and he is no longer up to the physical requirements of the job. Those long drives wear him out; his car is forever going off onto the shoulders of the road.

Finally and desperately, Willy asks to be relieved of road work and given an in-town job. He is then fired by the firm he has served for thirty-four years. By this time his two sons, in whom he had taken such pride and who have disappointed him gravely, are contemptuous of him. His own fault, because he taught them wrong, and when he needs them they turn against him. Willy takes the only course left to him. His insurance premiums are paid up; it's his bewildered decision that he will be more helpful to his family dead than alive.

"Death of a Salesman," presented by Kermit Bloomgarden and Walter Fried, is a play of prodigious impact, and it ends on a note of hope rather than one of futility. Some of its scenes are harrowing. There is the tremendously moving scene when the patient and loving mother sits down with the boys as they are sardonically considering their father's faults and reminds them that Willy has worked hard, that he was a good provider, and had more good in him than there was in a lot of other people. And there's the unforgettable scene when the older son, Biff, a star halfback in his promising years, fiercely berates the pathetic old man and then breaks into tears, sobbing on Willy Loman's shoulder.

Lee J. Cobb is enormously effective as Willy, the broken little man of the dreams and the illusions—pitiful, beaten and confused in the closing hours of his life—who saw in his son's failure his own futilities and mistakes and misdeeds, such as that of being found with a woman in a Boston hotel and thus humiliating Biff, who had idolized him. Arthur Kennedy brings tremendous force and drive into his playing of Biff, who finally decides that he knows who it is and what he wants to be. A vibrant young actor, this Kennedy.

Mildred Dunnock gives the finest performance of her career as the comprehending mother—a truly touching characterization. Howard Smith is splendid as Willy's realistic neighbor and only real friend, and he achieves a genuine eloquence in his reading of the epitaph of a salesman in the play's affecting final scene.

Cameron Mitchell is alive and vital as Willy's other son, who is wasting his life boisterously. Alan Hewitt makes a character of Willy's cold and snobbish young boss, and so does Thomas Chalmers as Uncle Ben, Alaskan prospector, who represents the ruthlessness of success. There is also vast approval from this department for the playing of Don Keefer, Tom Pedi and Constance Ford in small roles.

Arthur Miller has written a poignant, shattering and devastating drama in "Death of a Salesman." When the living theater soars it dwarfs all competitive mediums. It soared last night at the Morosco. Miller's new play is a triumph in writing, in acting and in stagecraft.

The New York Times

FEBRUARY 11, 1949

'Death of a Salesman,' a New Drama by Arthur Miller, Has Premiere at the Morosco

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Arthur Miller has written a superb drama. From every point of view "Death of a Salesman," which was acted at the Morosco last evening, is rich and memorable drama. It is so simple in style and so inevitable in theme that it scarcely seems like a thing that has been written and acted. For Mr. Miller has looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hope and anguish to the theatre. Under Elia Kazan's masterly direction, Lee J. Cobb gives a heroic performance, and every member of the cast plays like a person inspired.

* * *

Two seasons ago Mr. Miller's "All My Sons" looked like the work of an honest and able playwright. In comparison with the new drama, that seems like a contrived play now. For "Death of a Salesman" has the flow and spontaneity of a suburban epic that may not be intended as poetry but becomes poetry in spite of itself because Mr. Miller has drawn it out of so many intangible sources.

It is the story of an aging salesman who has reached the end of his usefulness on the road. There has always been something unsubstantial about his work. But suddenly the unsubstantial aspects of it overwhelm him completely. When he was young, he looked dashing; he enjoyed the comradeship of other people—the humor, the kidding, the business.

In his early sixties he knows his business as well as he ever did. But the unsubstantial things have become decisive; the spring has gone from his step, the smile from his face and the heartiness from his personality. He is through. The phantom of his life has caught up with him. As literally as Mr. Miller can say it, dust returns to dust. Suddenly there is nothing.

* * *

This is only a little of what Mr. Miller is saying. For he conveys this elusive tragedy in terms of simple things—the loyalty and understanding of his wife, the careless selfishness of his two sons, the sympathetic devotion of a neighbor, the coldness of his former boss' son—the bills, the car, the tinkering around the house. And most of all: the illusions by which he has lived—opportunities missed, wrong formulas for success, fatal misconceptions about his place in the scheme of things.

Writing like a man who understands people, Mr. Miller has no moral precepts to offer and no solutions of the salesman's problems. He is full of pity, but he brings no piety to it. Chronicler of one frowsy corner of the American scene, he evokes a wraith-like tragedy out of it that spins through the many scenes of his play and gradually envelops the audience.

* * *

As theatre "Death of a Salesman" is no less original than it is as literature. Jo Mielziner, always equal to an occasion, has designed a skeletonized set that captures the mood of the play and serves the actors brilliantly. Although Mr. Miller's text may be diffuse in form, Mr. Kazan has pulled it together into a deeply moving performance.

Mr. Cobb's tragic portrait of the defeated salesman is acting of the first rank. Although it is familiar and folksy in the details, it has something of the grand manner in the big size and the deep tone. Mildred Dunnock gives the performance of her career as the wife and mother—plain of speech but indomitable in spirit. The parts of the thoughtless sons are extremely well played by Arthur Kennedy and Cameron Mitchell, who are all youth, brag and bewilderment.

Other parts are well played by Howard Smith, Thomas Chalmers, Don Keefer, Alan Hewitt and Tom Pedi. If there were time, this report would gratefully include all the actors and fabricators of illusion. For they all realize that for once in their lives they are participating in a rare event in the theatre. Mr. Miller's elegy in a Brooklyn sidestreet is superb.

DAILY NEWS

FEBRUARY 11, 1949

'Death of a Salesman' a Fine Play, Beautifully Produced and Acted

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Death of a Salesman," which was presented last evening at the Morosco, is a very fine work in the American theatre. I cannot urge it upon you too strongly. To see it is to have one of those unforgettable times in which all is right and nothing is wrong.

It takes more than a script to make a play. It takes the concerted action of an intelligent author, an understanding producer, a sympathetic scenic designer, a resourceful director and a company of actors who are equal to anything the author has imagined and the director has tried to put into being. "Death of a Salesman" provides all these elements, and will cling to my memory as a notable piece of stagecraft.

The author is Arthur Miller, who showed promise when he wrote "The Man Who Had All the Luck" and who showed more promise with "All My Sons." In last evening's drama he has shown something new and more profound—a preoccupation with people rather than with ideas. He has discovered that we go to the theatre to see people, and that if he can make us love them or weep for them he has given us all we ask.

Mr. Cobb Magnificent.

The director is Elia Kazan, who is a perfectionist and a man of imagination as well. The scene designer is Jo Mielziner, who now has accomplished two of the three finest settings of the season. His other one was for "Summer and Smoke," and the third is the French Christian Berard's mounting of "The Madwoman of Chaillot."

As to the actors . . . Lee J. Cobb, playing a salesman whose once-happy world is crashing upon him in little pieces, is giving a magnificent performance. He is a salesman who, in his confident youth, was "riding on a smile and a shoe shine"—as somebody says of him after his suicide. It is a long, hard role, taking a man from self-assurance to doubt and then to despair, and Mr. Cobb plays it with infinite resourcefulness.

Mildred Dunnock, as his wife; Arthur Kennedy and Cameron Mitchell, as his sons; Howard Smith, as his neighbor, and Thomas Chalmers, as his brother, are giving performances to match, in order to tell a story about an ordinary little commercial traveler who talked bigger than he was and hoped for more than he got.

Weep for Him.

Mr. Miller's scheme for the play, in which a salesman in middle life reaches the end of his career and begins talking to himself, is perfectly realized by Mr. Mielziner's setting and Mr. Kazan's direction. When the salesman talks to himself about things that happened once, these things happen in front of us so that we can know about them. We can see that he was indeed riding on a smile and a shoe shine in his bravura years, and when his world and his mind begin to come apart we weep for him.

Mr. Miller has been praised before for the "naturalness" of his dialogue. His writing in "Death of a Salesman" is splendid—terse, always in character and always aimed toward the furtherance of his drama. As I said before, this is a very fine work in the American theatre—and everybody, including myself, will have much more to say about it.

"My Name Is Aquilon"

The Sun

FEBRUARY 10, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

A Very Skimpy Comedy.

"My Name Is Aquilon," a threadbare little comedy, adapted by Philip Barry from the French of Jean Pierre Aumont, was put on last night at the Lyceum by the Theater Guild. Robert B. Sinclair has given it painstaking direction and an attractive cast goes through the motions of acting a skimpy play that doesn't get much of anywhere.

There's a gay and voluble rogue in "My Name Is Aquilon"—Pierre Renault, to give you one of his names. He tells tall stories of a life that he has never lived, of adventures he never had, and of places he's never seen. He doesn't think of himself as an amiable or fanciful liar but as a creative artist when he talks of his war record and the excitements of the Argentine.

"My Name Is Aquilon," which achieves a certain gallantry and a charming scene at its final curtain, offers some bright moments and many dull ones. It tells of the general ruction created when the irresistible Pierre comes in upon the Parisian home of a black market profiteer. Wife, daughter and secretary are fairly overwhelmed by his glibness. It's upon the daughter that he has a particularly devastating effect. She gets around to taking him on his own terms and to believe in the reality of unreality. And for Pierre the lovely Christiane Benoit-Benoit will give up her luxurious home for a garret overlooking the Seine.

There are some fairly interminable interludes in "My Name Is Aquilon." Surprising, too, in a comedy crediting part authorship to a dramatist of Philip Barry's record and skill. The Theater Guild's players strive to supply a gayety and zest not to be found in the writing.

Jean Pierre Aumont, from whose "L'Empereur de Chine" the play was taken, is thoroughly ingratiating as the young man who is never concerned with truth or anything approximating it. Lilli Palmer gives an artful performance, particularly in the effective final scene, as the Parisian's daughter who believes in Pierre Renault if not in his stories.

Doe Avedon is direct and alert and appealing in a small role, and Phyllis Kirk is decorative in one even smaller. There is a hearty performance from Donald Hanmer. Such competent professionals as Lawrence Fletcher and Arlene Francis appear as the fatuous profiteer and his impressionable wife, and get little help from the authors. Stewart Chaney has supplied a fancy living room for an apartment in the Avenue Victor Hugo.

"My Name Is Aquilon" is innocuous, unoffending—and not very good.

'MY NAME IS AQUILON'

Play by Philip Barry; adapted from "L'Empereur de Chine" by Jean Pierre Aumont; staged by Robert B. Sinclair; scenery by Stewart Chaney; gowns designed by Valentina and Castillo; production under the supervision of Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner; presented by the Theatre Guild at the Lyceum Theatre, February 9, 1949. The cast:

Paulette.....Phyllis Kirk
Pierre Renault.....Jean Pierre Aumont
Christiane Benoit-Benoit.....Lilli Palmer
Denise.....Doe Avedon
Victor Benoit-Benoit.....Lawrence Fletcher
Madeleine Benoit-Benoit.....Arlene Francis
Toto.....Donald Hanmer
Bascoul.....Louis Borel
Rondet.....Richard Hepburn

Synopsis: Act I-The action of the play takes place in Paris between early April and late August last year and the scenes are as follows: Scene 1. An apartment on the Avenue Victor Hugo. Early April: Scene 2. The apartment. Two months later; Scene 3. A room in a small hotel on the Quai des Grand Augustins. Evening of the same day. Act II-Scene 1. The apartment. Late August. Night. Scene 2. The hotel room. The following morning.

New York World-Telegram

FEBRUARY 10, 1949

'Aquilon' So Boyish It May Get the Girls

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"My Name is Aquilon" is strictly for girls. It is about a boyish French juvenile, written by and starring a boyish French juvenile, and most men are likely to find it a talkative bore.

There seems to be a masochistic streak in many girls which lets them enjoy watching some ruthless charmer woo a woman, her stepdaughter, her husband's secretary, her waitress and her cook all at once. Most men find it offensive, or maybe they are jealous. As has been said before, the lady is a tramp and the gentleman is a dope.

That is what goes on here, when a penniless egotist is hired by the head of the house to carry transfers of black market cash to various foreign exchanges. After a great, great deal of talk, and a couple of charming scenes, the daughter wins the boy by realizing that his sordid life in the French underground has made him fall back on a fertile imagination for the glamour he missed.

An Accomplished Liar.

Jean Pierre Aumont, with an assist from Philip Barry, is the author and plays the accomplished liar. M. Aumont is tall and has a blond pompador, blue eyes and straight white teeth with all of which he freely engages the audience.

He has certain traditional gestures and expressions and a way of giving nearly every line the same inflection. All of this is played to the back of the house, which is proper for this sort of setup. It was intended as a matinee idol vehicle and he treats it as such.

Gallic Charmer.

No one could suggest that all this does M. Aumont any harm. On the contrary it establishes him as a ringleader in the Gallic charm school.

The most interesting thing to watch is what happens when Miss Lilli Palmer is on the stage. While the leading man is throwing all his artifices out front, Miss Palmer plays directly and unaffectedly to him, stays within the frame of the play, and makes a deep impression as a highly accomplished actress.

Her role of the daughter is warm, determined and wise, the sort of girl who has to comfort her distraught parents.

Arlene Francis Valiant.

Arlene Francis is valiant as ever, never pretending she thinks the would-be wit of her lines is any funnier than it is. She makes a perfectly pleasant creature of a married woman who is quite shocked to find herself falling for a professional juvenile.

In the role of the heavy-handed head of the house, Lawrence Fletcher is extremely helpful at keeping the play tossed in the air where it ought to be, with precise timing.

Robert Sinclair directed the play with a nice sense of tempo. It is languid because the script is so level in tone, and has opportunities for so little physical motion. The director wisely avoided stepping up the pace in a manner that would have made the play sound as if it pretended to be witty when it knew it was not.

Aquilon, incidentally, is a French word for a north wind to which the hero, in one of his more honest and idyllic moments, compares himself.

The New York Times

FEBRUARY 10, 1949

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Lilli Palmer is making her American stage debut in "My Name Is Aquilon," which was acted at the Lyceum last evening. That practically exhausts the good news for this morning. Although the Theatre Guild has produced it, "My Name Is Aquilon" is one of the most superfluous social events of the winter season—better than Sacha Guitry, but not much better.

* * *

Philip Barry has adapted it from "L'Empereur de Chine," by Jean Pierre Aumont. Since M. Aumont speaks English, he has been obliging enough to play one of the two leading parts in the English adaptation of his comedy. M. Aumont is an agreeable and animated actor who tosses his hands around with considerable spirit and emits booming volumes of sound. Since the comedy is excessively torpid, M. Aumont's simulation of interest in it is commendable, and the explosions of sound that roll out of him help to keep the audience awake.

Obviously, there must have been something in "L'Empereur de Chine" to attract Mr. Barry to it. Perhaps it made something ingratiating out of the notion that a little creative lying improves on the dismal facts of life. This is not much of a notion really. But it stands to reason that "My Name Is Aquilon" must have had a philosopher's stone in its background somewhere. It cannot be as pointless as it seems to be.

* * *

It is the story of Pierre, a romantic liar, who escapes from reality by inventing and living tall tales. He learned to live by his wits in the Army. At the time of the play he is smuggling banknotes and gold on a scale that is eminently respectable, living a dangerous life imaginatively. Possibly he is a working existentialist. Everyone falls in love with so dashing and fabulous a vagabond, including his employer's young daughter, who is looking for a hero. She is a little upset when she discovers that he is a liar and a crook, and he is depressed by the thought of living honestly. But since they are in love, they draw closer together. He starts lying less and she starts lying more.

Whatever the original motive of the play may have been, it has pretty well escaped by now, and nothing is left but a silly charade. The characters are enigmatic. The narrative is ambiguous, being congenitally unable to give the audience the information it needs. And the dialogue is neat but wearisome.

* * *

Under Robert B. Sinclair's direction, "My Name Is Aquilon" has been splendidly produced, with some handsome interior decoration by Stewart Chaney and gowns by Valentina and Castillo hemstitching in relays. Arlene Francis, wearing the Castillo gowns and shoes from I. Miller, plays a wayward French mother tactfully. Doe Avedon, whose couturier is anonymous though not bad, plays a footloose secretary competently. And Lawrence Fletcher, who probably had to find his own double-breasted suits and gentleman's furnishings, plays a Frenchman of affairs with proper austerity.

* * *

Miss Palmer introduces an element of confusion by playing with quiet charm and modest sincerity. She is a slight, alert young lady with fluid gestures and a sunny smile. In the midst of a muddled and hollow comedy, she plays with relaxed simplicity. Miss Palmer is the finest thing that has happened to the Gotham stage for quite a long time. If our housing commission is a really enterprising organization, it will find permanent quarters for Miss Palmer and her husband, Rex Harrison, and see that they never get out of town.

Journal-American

FEBRUARY 10, 1949

Aumont's New Play Airs Aumont's Charm

By ROBERT GARLAND

If Jean Pierre Aumont and his "My Name Is Aquilon" are what moviegoers like when they turn legitimate, then Jean Pierre Aumont and his "My Name Is Aquilon" are what moviegoers like when they turn legitimate. A natural born legitimate myself, I don't know. Or care! Last night, at the Lyceum, they seemed harmless enough to me.

In case, like me, you hadn't heard, Jean Pierre Aumont is a gentleman of standing in moviegoers' eyes. His pictures that pretend to be plays include "Assignment in Brittany," "The Cross of Lorraine," "Heartbeat" the "Siren of Atlantis" of which he may well have played the title role. And "The Last Port," in two languages.

Now, for business reasons of its own, The Theatre Guild has fetched Jean Pierre Aumont and his "My Name Is Aquilon" to Broadway. And again in case, like me, you hadn't heard, "My Name Is Aquilon" is the American title of the self-made vehicle in which he acted at Paris' Theatre des Mathurins. There it was "L'Empereur de Chine."

Here, in dutiful transcription by Philip Barry, it goes its harmless way under Robert Sinclair's remote direction against one handsome and one atmospheric background by Stewart Chaney. Maybe—I hope—the moviegoers turned legitimate will pay to see it. It and its author-star, Jean Pierre Aumont!

* * *

Full of Charm

The fellow who says his name is Aquilon, isn't Aquilon. And, although he goes by the name of Pierre Renault, that too, isn't his. So, for purposes of reporting, call him Jean Pierre Aumont. According to the story at the Lyceum, M. Aumont is a charmer from Charmersville. Charmersville is that dear Paris, France.

Boy, has he got charm! No sooner is he in the Benoit-Benoit apartment on the Avenue Victor Hugo than his charm takes over. It takes over Paulette, the Benoit-Benoit maid. And Christiane, the Benoit-Benoit daughter. And Madeleine, the Benoit-Benoit wife. And Victor Benoit-Benoit, after a tiny tussel.

Jean Pierre Aumont does it with one hand in his pocket. How, I wish I knew. Maybe it's his g o l d e n pompadour, which must take a lot of fixing. Maybe it's his pearly smile, which is handsomely Hollywooden. Maye it's his silvery Eenglish, which is cracked without being broken. I must ask a legitimatized moviegoer I know!

After much is said and little done, M. Aumont turns down all the Benoit-Benoits but Christiane, the daughter. Jean Pierre, who lives in an attic on the Quai des Augustins, tells her to come up and see him sometime. Lured by his Great Big Gallic It that passes non-Gallic understanding, she does.

* * *

Reaction of Cast

What is there to be said about the acting? Even the theatre can't have acting when there's nothing to act. Frankly, there's nothing for Jean Pierre Aumont's cast to do but react to the author-actor's charm. Especially the ladies. If that charm were catnip and those ladies were kittens—

But Lilli Palmer, in gowns by Valentina, does what she can to sink her charm in the charm of M. Aumont. Arlene Francis in gowns by Castillo, does likewise. But Miss Francis' charm isn't as sinkable as that of Miss Palmer. As for Phyllis Kirk, in gowns by anybody, she gives up early in the evening.

The male members of the cast aren't untouched by M. Aumont's charm, either. Especially Lawrence Fletcher, whose Victor Benoit-Benoit capitulates after a tiny tussle. And Donald Hammer, whose Toto has fallen when you meet him. As for the gendarmes of Louis Borel and Richard Hepburn, they're pushovers for Jean Pierre . . .

Which means that "My Name Is Aquilon" is all Jean Pierre Aumont's. By him, about him, with him, if it's what moviegoers like when they turn legitimate, it's what they're asking for. If it isn't, I don't think natural-born theatregoers will find it greatly to their liking. This one doesn't. And that's the truth about it.

"My Name Is Aquilon"—*continued*

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

FEBRUARY 10, 1949

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Elegance Without Substance

SEVERAL excellent players have been guided skillfully through a paper-thin script in the Theater Guild's production of "My Name Is Aquilon." The Philip Barry adaptation of Jean Pierre Aumont's comedy at the Lyceum Theater is a laggard saga of an arch-liar, having a minimum of wit or wisdom. The original author plays the leading role, with brilliant support from Lilli Palmer, as the eager daughter of a French post-war racketeer, who accepts a present - day Tartuffe on any grounds. Under Robert B. Sinclair's astute supervision, Aumont, Miss Palmer, Arlene Francis and the others in the company make the most of tiny situations. Stewart Chaney has backed them up with a couple of elegant settings, while Valentino and Castillo have vied with each other in fabricating sumptuous gowns.

* * *

The play was known in French as "L'Empereur de Chine." The English title has far less force, unless one has studied up on Aquilon. Under any name, the work is merely the narration of a born rogue's invasion of a somewhat unstable Parisian household, convincing others and himself of an invented past. Aumont had a fleeting idea in his composition of a faltering farce. Barry has not enlarged on it to any great extent in his translation. Through five tedious scenes, it takes all the cunning of smart performers to keep one vaguely interested in the denouement. When it occurs, it has all the pat conventionalities of a cinematic climax.

* * *

Miss Palmer has not been seen before on the American stage. Her debut is triumphant. She handles the awkward role of the heroine with grace, precision and delicate modulation. Even when the script has little substance or meaning, she brings a radiant quality to the offering which makes one feel that Aumont and Barry were really working in the field of the theater. Her first meeting with a scoundrel is a luminous bit of make-believe. Her final scene with the fellow is almost touching, for all the triteness of the exposition.

* * *

Aumont is never as sure of himself in his own play as is Miss Palmer. At his best, he conjures up a blurred portrait of a man who has lived through occupied France and has decided to escape from a dreadful reality into a world of lies. At his worst he is a smooth-spoken Lothario, whose bitterness evokes slight sympathy. Miss Francis is fine as the forlorn wife of the black market operator and Lawrence Fletcher gives a good account of himself as the crook. Then there are Doe Avedon, Donald Hanmer and Phyllis Kirk lending moments of validity to a shaky play. "My Name Is Aquilon" once more finds good acting being misspent.

New York Post
HOME NEWS

FEBRUARY 10, 1949

'My Name Is Aquilon' Dull Essay in Charm

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

There are few things more boring in the theatre than pointless but determined charm, and that is about all you will find in "My Name Is Aquilon," which Philip Barry has adapted from Jean Pierre Aumont's "L'Empereur de Chine." The Theatre Guild has engaged some attractive actors for the comedy and Mr. Barry has written an occasional graceful scene, but the result of all the effort at the Lyceum last night was a kind of exercise in tedium. Charm without a play can be a melancholy experience.

"My Name Is Aquilon" is not only based on Mr. Aumont's French success, but exhibits the young actor-playwright in its all-important central role. A pleasant and attractive player, who looks curiously like a romantic Danny Kaye, if you can imagine such a thing, Mr. Aumont both reveals some of the qualities of the matinee idol and suggests that, under happier circumstances, he might be an effective actor. He is perhaps slightly conscious of the charm, but he makes it painless and even likeable, which is a feat.

Here he is to be found as an ex-member of the French resistance, with a wild and careless imagination, who finds himself entangled in the post-war black market, several romantic affairs, and his own talent for lying picturesquely. Like another Theatre Guild offering, "The Silver Whistle," the play seems bent on defending the value of the colorful and imaginative lie as a poetic defense against the dullness and ugliness of realty and a blessing to beset humanity, but it is far less successful in its advocacy than the Jose Ferrer vehicle.

There may be also some oblique comments on the effect of the devious, undercover activities of wartime on the civilian life of contemporary French youth, and there is the hint of an ironic contrast between the romantic falsehoods of the soldier and the practical lies of the black-market businessman. All of these editorial reflections, however, are pretty effectively concealed in the slow-paced, remarkably unstimulating pursuit of charm as the play follows the mildly amorous adventures of the hero and the girl who understands him.

In the process the actors are rather completely wasted. Lilli Palmer is quietly pleasant as the tolerant, knowing heroine, but I would rather see her and Mr. Aumont in something sturdier before reporting fully and dogmatically on their status in the theatre. Arlene Francis hasn't one of her happiest times as the romantic wife of a pompous black-market operator, and Lawrence Fletcher, who is expert at playing blustering, hollow men of affairs, has limited opportunities as the disagreeable black-marketeer.

In the small role of a jilted and vengeful admirer of the hero, Doe Avedon, who made such a favorable impression as the schoolgirl vallainess of "The Young and Fair," has little to do, but she again indicates vividly that she is an actress who is going to be heard of in the theatre. Donald Hanmer brings a welcome vitality to a bit part, and Phyllis Kirk is pictorially helpful as a maid who also admires the charm boy. "My Name Is Aquilon" ends better than it begins but it never gets exactly stimulating.

DAILY NEWS

FEBRUARY 10, 1949

'My Name Is Aquilon' a Frail Sex Comedy for Jean Pierre Aumont

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The Theatre Guild, going European on us again, turned up a comedy at the Lyceum Theatre last evening titled "My Name Is Aquilon." Either thanks to or in spite of the efforts of the translator, Philip Barry, it is quite desperately French, and no more than a vehicle for an actor-author named Jean Pierre Aumont.

Mr. Aumont, the actor, is a very pleasant fellow with ingratiating manners, a good voice, an excellent tailor and an artistic hair trimmer. Mr. Aumont, the author (Mr. Barry's play is based on "L'Empereur de Chine," by J. P. Aumont), is not one to give his other self any of the worst of it. The author has fixed it for the actor to be one hell of a fellow with the women.

Aumont, the actor, obviously had a much better time up on the stage than did Chapman, the spectator, down in the audience. While Jean Pierre was conquering Lilli Palmer, desolating Arlene Francis and egling a couple of former photographers models named Doe Avedon and Phyllis Kirk, John C. was sitting uneasily in a seat the Guild had bestowed upon him and wondering if the French sex comedy would ever grow up.

Quite a Role

"My Name Is Aquilon" is about a charming liar and braggart who gets into an upper-class French home and becomes a combination of the Admirable Crichton, Liliom and Topaze. This keeps him busy for both acts.

I particularly admired a supporting performance by Lawrence Fletcher in the role of Mr. Aumont's employer. Miss Francis is always nice to see on a stage, and Miss Palmer exhibits a placid devotion to her leading man which doubtless is in accordance with the script—but which does not make me terribly interested in Miss Palmer.

As it is with most Theatre Guild productions, this one is quite handsome, with settings by Stewart Chaney and women's needlework by Valentina and Castillo. Robert Sinclair directed. "Diamond Lil," an American sex comedy, is within easy walking distance as long as this fine weather holds out.

Daily Mirror

FEBRUARY 10, 1949

New Philip Barry Comedy Proves Disappointing

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The Theatre Guild seems to be specializing in plays about dreamers, raffish tellers of tall tales, this season. After scoring a resounding success with the glib Oliver Erwenter of "The Silver Whistle," it turned its attention last evening to the less glib and far less interesting Pierre Renault of "My Name Is Aquilon."

The latter has been adapted by Philip Barry from Jean Pierre Aumont's French script, "L'Empereur de Chine." This Barry admirer must confess that this master of modern high comedy has turned in an inferior job in this instance. The brilliant dialogue that is Barry's trademark is seldom in evidence, and too little time is devoted to coping with human values in a light vein.

The central figure of "My Name Is Aquilon" is a brash young Parisian, who has a hypnotic influence over the women he encounters, and few scruples. Hardened by experiences in the underground, he has learned to live by his wits. With an imaginative, glamorous background, he obtains a post as blackmarketeer for a wealthy Frenchman.

His business duties consist of turning paper money into gold via trips to foreign financial centers. His pleasures come from romances with the daughter, wife and secretary of the capitalist. In the end he is exposed as a fake, but such an ingratiating fake that the daughter decides to stick by him.

Author Aumont plays the brassy, facile, gaminesque, romantic young adventurer with effective charm. Lilli Palmer is beguiling as his willing dupe and most ardent defender. The ever reliable Arlene Francis is excellent, as usual, as the profiteer's wife.

Dependable Lawrence Fletcher does well by the outwardly respectable racketeer. Doe Avedon is an attractive, though too tense, secretary. This promising young actress, we think, will improve as she learns to relax on stage. Donald Hanmer, who won enthusiastic salutes in "Sundown Beach," makes the most of a couple of brief appearances.

It is good to have Director Robert B. Sinclair back with us, after a too lengthy stay in Hollywood, but we regret that he did not have something better to work with upon his return.

"My Name Is Aquilon" has some engaging and absorbing moments, but not sufficient for a completely satisfying evening in the theatre. Pierre Renault, even with Aumont impersonating him, is not nearly so rewarding and magnetic a fellow as Oliver Erwenter, alias Jose Ferrer. Frankly, the new arrival is a disappointment. It's nebulous entertainment.

"Richard III"

Daily Mirror

FEBRUARY 9, 1949

Whorf Dynamic in Fine Revival of 'Richard III'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The versatile Richard Whorf revived William Shakespeare's "Richard III" for the Boston Repertory Association at the Copley Theatre several weeks ago. There it was seen by Herman Levin, who was sufficiently stirred to extract his checkbook and write out a down payment on it. So, under Levin's sponsorship, the Elizabethan study in villainy arrived at New York's Booth Theatre last evening.

Not content with acting the horrendous Richard, Whorf also has designed settings and costumes that should be analyzed by those who complain of the high cost of modern theatrical productions. Using a huge, dark gray span of arches, a few set pieces and admirable imagination, Whorf has provided effective and atmospheric backgrounds for a rousing melodrama.

Richard Barr's direction and lighting are most helpful to the current production. Barr suggests Richard's more sanguinary moments by switching from white to red spot lights.

"Richard III," in our opinion, is not one of the great Shakespearean plays, but it towers head and shoulders over most of the scripts you are likely to encounter on the boards today. The Bard was in the formative stage when he penned it, acquiring the craftsmanship that was to make him, for many, the world's greatest playwright.

Richard III is perhaps Shakespeare's darkest-dyed villain. Murder was as commonplace to him as breakfast food is to the average small fry. Had he not been driven from the throne by Richmond, who was to become Henry VII, he might have depopulated England. He makes Iago seem like a reasonably good guy.

Whorf has made judicious cuts in the script, which move it at a speedy pace and emphasize Richard's stark criminality. He has also provided a spur to drive play-goers to their English histories, though there are illuminating chronological notes in the program. One of them suggests that you continue your researches by attending "Anne of the Thousand Days" at the nearby Shubert. For Henry VIII was Richmond's second son.

Whorf gives a dynamic and dominating performance in the title role. His is a Richard III that can stand comparison with some of the great projections of the past.

He is handsomely supported by Philip Bourneuf, Grace Coppin, Polly Rowles, Frances Reid, Will Kuluva, Robert H. Harris, Michael Sivy and Nehemiah Persoff. He has proved that we have a sufficiency of gifted young players to do justice to Shakespeare. He has confounded the pessimists who are constantly bewailing their inability to cast plays.

We recommend Whorf's "Richard III" to you. We wonder why so long a time has passed since it was last given here. It has been quite a spell, too lengthy a spell to wait for the sound of that desperate cry: "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!"

Shakespeare fashioned plays to be acted. Of course, it is wonderful to read his works, but it is infinitely more pleasurable and profitable to see them on a stage.

'RICHARD III'

Play by William Shakespeare; staged and lighted by Richard Barr; settings and costumes by Richard Whorf; presented by Herman Levin at the Booth Theatre, February 8, 1949. The cast:

Richard.....Richard Whorf
George.....Will Kuluva
Brackenbury.....Alan Frost
Hastings.....Robert H. Harris
Anne.....Frances Reid
Tressel.....Robert Carricart
Berkeley.....Milton Selzer
Queen Elizabeth...Polly Rowles
Rivers.....Glenn Wilson
Grey.....David Clive
Dorset.....Douglass Watson
Vaughan.....Warren Burmeister
Duke of Buckingham.....
Philip Bourneuf
Stanley.....Orrin Redfield
Catesby.....William Nichols
Ratcliff.....Ray Walston
Lovel.....Charles Nahabedian
Queen Margaret...Grace Coppin
Edward IV.....Joseph Foley
Lord Mayor of London.....
Walter F. Appler
Tyrell.....Nehemiah Persoff
Richmond.....Michael Sivy
Citizens.....Connie Lessard and Ed Hoffman

New York World-Telegram

FEBRUARY 9, 1949

Whorf's 'Richard III' Has Fine Moments

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There was an enthusiastic reception last night for Richard Whorf and his "Richard III" company at their final curtain, but one suspects they had given a performance not nearly as good as they had hoped to, and that their future performances will be vastly superior.

There is imagination, clarity and a staccato sweep to the production. This is probably the most villainous play ever written, by Shakespeare or anyone else, and its deadly intricacies must rise from undeniable and diseased necessity, or the whole thing remains play acting.

At the start of the drama, the crippled Richard is a long way from the throne. Through his deformity, a feeling of inferiority in every department of his life is a clear psychological reason for his wickedness.

Cut Down in Battle.

By two murders and a banishment, he wipes out the immediate members of the reigning house of Lancaster. With the crown in his own family of York, he proceeds to clear his bloody way to the throne. He kills his two brothers, his two nephews, his wife and most of his friends before his own coronation can take place, then is shortly cut down himself in battle.

In Mr. Whorf's performance of this vile character, there are fine moments, most often in his soliloquies. The general progression of the man as he is magnetized into repeated evil is not entirely believable.

Through the first half of the play there is too often a vividness to humorous comment which is not balanced by any grave force in the serious passages. Thus the discussion of killings accomplished or conceived sounds like casual scorekeeping.

Impressive Coronation.

Richard's actual mounting of the throne is most impressive, and so is his immediate suspicion of his closest colleagues. Here for the first time the play takes on a positive instead of just a reacted horror. This mood reaches a tingling climax in Richard's last soliloquy.

Philip Bourneuf has dignity and conviction as the ill-fated Buckingham and projects a deep emotional effect with the speech as he moves toward his executioner.

Almost alone in the cast through the early portions of the play, Frances Reid compels one to accept the dreadful mood of the story. As Anne, whose husband and father-in-law are killed, she rampages against the murderer with passionate vitriol, then subtly suggests the woman's weakening under his protests.

Rages Through Curses.

Polly Rowles has definite quality as Elizabeth, and is most moving in her tender dolors for her sons, the little Princes of the Tower. Grace Coppin rages through the old Queen Margaret's curses and has a bitter strength when her prophecies are proven right.

Two smaller parts are excellently read by Michael Sivy as Richmond, and Nehemiah Persoff as Tyrell.

The course of the play moves through two quarter circle arches at the back, and uses the pit as a further exit. There is constant and most successful dramatic use of lights, with a repeated theme of a strident red that spells wickedness and death.

DAILY NEWS

FEBRUARY 9, 1949

Richard Whorf as Richard 3d, or 'My Kingdom for a Horse Opera'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The workers of Shubert Alley, which is bounded on the south by the Shubert Theatre and on the north by the Booth, are now one big unhappy family. On the south Rex Harrison and Joyce Redman are lopping heads as Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn; on the north, beginning last evening, Richard Whorf has seized his snickersnee and is cutting his way through Shakespeare and a forest of vertebrae to the throne-dom of Richard III.

"Richard III" is one of the more difficult historical dramas of Shakespeare. It is practically lousy with beheadings, which should make it good fun in the theatre, but it also is filled with more genealogical detail than any literary work since Genesis. The program dutifully explains in small type who everybody is and to whom, but since it is not printed in Braille it offers a minimum of entertainment.

The one who is offering the entertainment is Mr. Whorf. A brave and ambitious gentleman of the stage, he has undertaken to edit the play, to design its production and costumes and to portray its horrendous leading character.

Like a Horse Opera.

He is presenting "Richard III" like a Western, fast and furious. If he has not quite succeeded in "streamlining" the tragedy, he has at least cut it up into short takes. And his performance—particularly in the beginning, when he gives the bent and bloodthirsty monarch a fine amount of cynical humor—is quite admirable. He speaks well always, and he plays with confidence and vigor.

But it struck me last evening that the urge to get "Richard III" over with as quickly as possible might occasionally have been tempered, for the actors were outrunning the audience. When, at the end, Richard cried, "A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse," I expected one of the baddies in his outfit to whip up Gene Autry's Trigger, and to see the King dusting off into the High Sierra.

A Helpful Company.

But, of course, Richard never got his nag. Richmond (head of the House of Lancaster, later Henry VII) kills him, assumes the throne, talks nobly of peace and in due time begets Rex Harrison. And down the alley Mr. Harrison is saying that his old man was a scoundrel who had stolen everything that wasn't nailed down.

This family stuff is inescapable, but I'd like to get away from it to note that Mr. Whorf's company contains some charming players, including Polly Rowles as Queen Elizabeth, Grace Coppin as Queen Margaret; Frances Reid as Anne and Philip Bourneuf as the Duke of Buckingham.

Mr. Whorf's costumes are nice but not splendid and his setting is very simple and efficient. I admire his devotion and energy, and applaud his desire to stir some life into a pretty dull play. But I think he'd have done better to throw out his remnant of script and ask Maxwell Anderson to write him a new one.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

FEBRUARY 9, 1949

= By HOWARD BARNES =

"Bind Up My Wounds"

RICHARD WHORF'S "Richard III," at the Booth Theater, is a lurid and occasionally enlightening portrait of sheer devilry. The actor's streamlined version of the Shakespeare tragedy, which he prepared abroad in the final year of the war, has savagely effective moments. He has cleared up most of the inherent confusion of the plot without having to add scenes from "Henry VI," as John Barrymore did in 1920. In his hands "that bottl'd spider, that foul bunch-back'd toad," who did away with friend and foe alike to gain a throne, is the epitome of evil. Even with the excellent aid of Philip Bourneuf, as the Duke of Buckingham; Grace Coppin, Frances Reid, Polly Rowles and Nehemiah Persoff, the revival remains in one strident key, with scarcely an interlude of emotional clarity or eloquence.

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The work has never had an auspicious reception here, although there is evidence that it was first performed on Nassau Street in 1750. The bard must take a great deal of blame for its failure to be inspiring as well as terrifying. Once the misshapen Duke of Gloucester starts on his business of wholesale homicide it is merely a question of how many corpses will clutter up the stage before Henry VII defeats him at Bosworth Field and brings an end to the bloody War of the Roses. Whorf has made much of Richard's physical deformity, which prompted a great deal of his sadistic machinations, including the slaughtering of the little princes in the Tower of London. He has dovetailed scenes neatly to give the action pace and variety. But he has not illumined a thriller which becomes monotonous before the climax.

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It is easy to see why "Richard III" has tempted a long list of notable actors. The scheming Gloucester is on stage in almost every scene, courting women whose kinsmen he has stabbed, seizing the throne with a fanatical delight and immediately turning on the Buckingham who helped to crown him, or plotting dire deeds even on the eve of his extermination. It is a part made for hunch-backed swaggering and full emphasis on the monstrosities of the human mind and spirit. What it needs is a recognizable definition of the impulses that can turn a man into a treacherous and implacable killer. Whorf has given one a few glimpses of these urges, but not enough to make the Booth offering very satisfying.

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Bourneuf is excellent as the cousin who helps Richard to his horriole eminence. He reads the Shakespeare lines with power and resonance and he makes the final revulsion of Buckingham a matter of considerable dramatic consequence, when he hears that the small princes have been done in. Miss Coppin is fine as the widow of Henry VI, who puts a curse on the foul Plantagenet and Persoff brings dignity to a lesser portrayal. The Whorf settings and costumes fit his project well, although there is a loud-speaker dream which is trying. Richard Barr's staging is as staccato as the action. "Richard III" is interesting, but scarcely triumphant.

Journal and American

FEBRUARY 9, 1949

Whorf's Pepped Up Play Is Overwrought

By ROBERT GARLAND

Propelled in our direction by Boston's good notices and bad business, Richard Whorf's pepping up of William Shakespeare's "Richard III" has landed in the lap of the Booth Theatre. There, at the north exit from Shubert Alley, it differs from any reproduction of the tragedy I have ever seen.

Only the other week, the critical Bostonians blew their tops over Mr. Whorf's high-pitched impersonation of this son of a Plantagenet. And over Mr. Whorf's underneath-the-arches settings for his background. And over Mr. Whorf's Alice-in-Wonderland costumes for the characters that move against it.

Even in my theatre-going days, "Richard III" has had several Broadway klekings around. George Coulouris' was the most recent. That was preceded by those of Walter Hampden, Fritz Leiber, Robert Mantell and John Barrymore. In the late Mr. Barrymore's, the play and the playwright suffered least.

Now, in Mr. Whorf's, the play and the playwright suffer most. Star, adapter, costumer and scenery man—in two words, Richard Whorf — worked hand in hand to create a showy show that is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing much but a weakness for playing theatre in public.

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More Sense, Skill

There are both more and less in "Richard III" than now meets ear and eye. There is more sense, more skill in the playwright's fundamental art of simple storytelling. So mutilated is the narrative in Richard Whorf's carved-up Boston version that the story line is almost completely mislaid.

Always a "confused affair," Mr. Whorf's pepping-up has added to the confusion. I am sure that half the people in the first eager audience had small idea who was who, what was what, or why was why. And this in the face of the "historical data" and a "genealogical table" featured in the program.

What is more, there is less opportunity for splitting the ears of the groundlings in "Richard III" than is observable on 45th Street. During most of the three acts into which the play is divided, Mr. Whorf and his periwig-pated fellows tear their text into tatters. All evening you are yelled at!

It is amazing how the melodramatic-history William Shakespeare wrote is lost in the sound and fury beside the Shubert Alley. Richard Whorf, as man-of-all-work in and about this Shakespearian misdemeanor, has sacrificed the play itself in an effort to create a sort of Mr. Hyde in King's clothing.

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High, Heady

All this, and much more, calls for overacting. And gets it! Beginning his character and his play fortissimo furioso, there is nowhere for him to go but down. But down is out of Mr. Whorf's vocabulary. So the play and the heady until the at long last ending.

The star himself is the worst offender. His Richard, as Duke into King, is overwrought, overplayed and over-simplified. Neither God nor Shakespeare created him as the simple bogeyman of Mr. Whorf's gimpy characterization. Obviously, he should be something more than a "poisonous, hunchbacked toad."

In Richard Whorf's personalized version, that is all he is. And the others lose their actorial way in a loyal effort to remain well in their star's pepped-up picture. It may make for a showy show. But, after three fortissimo acts and 17 furioso scenes, you are as worn out as the players and their play.

As the Duke of Buckingham, Philip Bourneuf is sometimes quieter than the others. Frances Reid, Polly Rowles and Grace Coppin are the three bewitched, bothered and bewildered queens ...But, for my passes, those bravoing Bostonians can have Richard Whorf's benzadrined "Richard III" right back again.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
FEBRUARY 9, 1949

The New 'Richard III' An Exciting Show

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

That Shakespearean gangster melodrama, "Richard III," was vigorously and rousingly brought to the stage of the Booth Theatre last night, with Richard Whorf triumphing handsomely in the role of the monstrous hunchback. It is not a subtle performance or a subtle production, but then "Richard III" is not a subtle play. What Shakespeare wrote was both an exciting show and a lurid masterpiece of venom, invective and black malignity, and that is just the way Mr. Whorf and his associates are playing it. Theirs is a performance that has pace, color and a mounting violence that never ceases to be engrossing.

"Richard III" is, among other things, one of the most successful propaganda plays ever written. There is historical evidence that the hapless monarch was not the reptilian ogre legend has made him, but his enemies, the Tudors who succeeded him, wanted him painted that way, and that is the way Shakespeare portrayed him. After seeing the resulting chronicle drama, it is not difficult to see why it is the hostile Shakespearean portrait that has clung to the imagination through the ages. It is a portrait so overwhelming in its diabolical power that posterity couldn't have resisted it.

Mr. Whorf

I never saw the incomparable John Barrymore play the role, and I can believe the claims of those who did that he brought a satanic humor to his performance which Mr. Whorf cannot quite capture. Nevertheless, the Whorf portrayal has a genuine brilliance all its own. It is alive with ferocity, mercilessness, guile, hatred of all mankind and contempt for all the world. It has its own kind of humor, too, that is composed of scorn for the men and women who can be so taken in by Richard's sly apeal to their lowest emotions of ambition, greed and vanity, and joy in outwitting them.

Mr. Whorf also has the great virtue of knowing how to speak Shakespearean verse in a manner that sacrifices neither its tremendous dramatic vitality nor its moving eloquence. Indeed, next to the electric vigor of the present production, its finest quality is that it is so generally well-spoken. No American actor, for example, knows how to read the lines of Shakespeare more skillfully than Philip Bourneuf, and his Buckingham is always admirably managed. Equally effective is the prophetic Margaret of Grace Coppin, and there are impressive performances by Polly Rowles as Elizabeth and Will Kuluva as Clarence.

The Conspiracies

It is to be doubted if even a student of English history, unless he boned up on the subject, could follow in detail all the plots, conspiracies and family relationships that are involved in "Richard III," or any of the other Shakespearean chronicle dramas. The unwary playgoer should be warned against any such futile attempt in witnessing the production at the Booth. To try is both virtually useless and entirely unnecessary. It is enough to follow the villainy of Richard in general outline, and at once this Tudor vengeance upon an enemy monarch becomes a richly exciting theatrical evening.

"Richard III" is certainly not one of the greatest of the Master's plays. Unquestionably, it lacks the depth, sweep and emotional and intellectual insight of a "Hamlet," a "King Lear," or an "Antony and Cleopatra." But as a picture of sheer diabolical villainy and the darkest recesses of the human spirit, it is wonderful to behold. Richard Barr's staging is proudly and unashamedly melodramatic, even going so far as to play a red spotlight on Richard's malignant features, and it never fails in vitality, excitement and resource. The pale hand of the pedant never interferes with a great, vibrant show.

The Sun
FEBRUARY 9, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

An Exciting 'Richard III.'

That gory old melodrama, "Richard III," one of the bloodiest tragedies ever written, was restored to the New York stage last night as Richard Whorf, who is something of a one-man theater, came into the Booth in an invigorating production. This new "Richard" is fast-moving; it has life and spirit, and Whorf turns in a first-rate performance.

Whorf brings power, subtlety and variety to his characterization of the crooked-backed and demoniacal Duke of Gloucester. His Duke is a sly and cunning monster in his hideous plottings and horrifying deeds, and toward the end, just before he is slain on Bosworth Field, he is a figure of agony and terror. Besides showing a commendable courage in taking over a role that has been played by some of the great men of the American theater, Whorf also designed the settings, supervised the lighting, and worked with Richard Barr in cutting the text. It's now this department's pleasure to offer its cheers.

The Booth's offering is a within-a-budget production that has come to town via Boston under the sponsorship of Herman Levin, and it is one of many vivid scenes. Whorf's wooing of Anne is particularly well done. Queen Margaret's blazing defiance of Richard is excellent; so are the scenes between the deformed and hellish Richard and the Duke of Buckingham. The excitement that the play creates in the beginning is maintained for most of the evening.

The company that has come along to enact all this bloody business is an able one. The new production introduces a fine actress in Polly Rowles, who has the role of Queen Elizabeth. She is sharp and deft in her playing, there is clarity in her reading, and she gave some of us the feeling last night that she would make an impressive Lady Macbeth.

That expert actor, Philip Bourneuf, again comes through with a thoroughly creditable performance as the Duke of Buckingham, which he played in the George Coulouris production of six years ago. Will Kuluva is skillful in his projection of the terror of the Duke of Clarence just before he is slaughtered by Richard's assassins, and good work is contributed by Grace Coppin as Queen Margaret, Frances Reid as Anne and Robert H. Harris as Hastings. Michael Sivy is eloquent as the victorious and avenging Richmond.

"Richard III," capably staged by Richard Barr, is a valid production, and one in which the dauntless Whorf gives a performance of distinction. Put down the Booth's new offering as a worthy contribution to Broadway's midwinter theater.

The New York Times

FEBRUARY 9, 1949

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Apparently the Richards have a natural affinity for Shakespeare's bloodiest scoundrel. Richard Burbage was the original Richard III. Richard Whorf is playing him now. Limping around malevolently in the midst of a swift and taut production, Mr. Whorf opened at the Booth last evening in the best of evil spirits. For he is one of the younger generation of theatre people who like to plunge briskly into the heart of a drama without making genuflections to tradition.

He has cut the play down to practical size. As his own scene-designer, he has set the stage with a grim Roman arch that carries the motive of the Tower of London throughout the drama. And as Richard, he tears savagely into Shakespeare's most candid and monstrous villain in the spirit of modern melodramas.

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Without being in any way distinguished, this is an interesting and lively approach to Shakespeare's play. For Shakespeare, at the beginning of his career, packed it more solidly with bloody abominations than history had painted Richard's villainies in garish colors without subtlety and wrote verse that is closer akin to declamation and rhetoric than to poetry. Simple in design, "Richard III" is a headlong drama and the characters are passionate and vigorous. But it has none of the insight, illumination and glory of Shakespeare's more mature plays.

If Mr. Whorf does not improve on Shakespeare, he does not let Shakespeare down. His Richard is lean, fanatical, nervous, quick-minded and cold-blooded. He is a cripple with a bad leg and a crooked back scheming to get by treachery the sweets that nature has withheld from him.

* * *

Since Mr. Whorf is more interested in the play than in the part, he has surrounded himself with his equals. Philip Bourneuf's guileful but more presentable Buckingham; Grace Coppin's angry Margaret; Polly Rowles hot-tempered Elizabeth; Frances Reid's pliable Anne; Robert H. Harris' valiant Hastings; Orrin Redfield's modest Stanley; Will Kuluva's trusting Duke of Clarence; Walter F. Appler's naive Lord Mayor, and Michael Sivy's gallant Richmond—these are all lucid, mettlesome characters worthy of Mr. Whorf's Richard and Shakespeare's play. On its own terms as crisp and vivid theatre this "Richard III" is first-rate work.

But this playgoer will have to confess to wishing that it might be a great deal more. Elementary as the text is, Burbage must have given the part more size, space and style, to judge by the very little that we know about him now. And this was the part—in a recklessly-edited version, to be sure—in which Cibber and Garrick made great reputations.

* * *

No one today expects acting in the grand style, which does not conform to contemporary manners. But Mr. Whorf's Richard leaves a general impression of hurry for the sake of speed alone—a rush and a fury, less to express the play than to keep boredom out of the theatre. There is no variation in his marathon acting—no art and craft in the planning of the villainies, no architecture in the construction of the character. The wooing, the wheedling are in the same shrill key as the murdering.

Give Mr. Whorf all proper credit for achieving a tense, sharp, blunt modern production of an old melodrama. But speed and drive do not solve all the problems of Shakespeare. There must be a little art in it, too.

"Diamond Lil"

DAILY NEWS

FEBRUARY 7, 1949

Same Old Mae in Same Old Play, But 'Diamond Lil' Is Funnier Now

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Mae West, the most gifted female impersonator since Julian Eltinge, returned Saturday evening in her 20-year-old shocker, "Diamond Lil," and had me and the rest of the Coronet Theatre audience laughing fit to—if you'll pardon the expression—bust.

She talks as if she hasn't quite been able to swallow a toasted marshmallow all the way down, and when she isn't talking she seems to be trying to fetch a remnant of pork chop out of a back cavity. When she moves, which is constantly, she exhibits the elastic convolutions of a batch of salt water taffy in an Atlantic City boardwalk machine.

It is the same old Mae in the same old play—and now it is funnier and so is she. Its extravagant sexiness and its background of Bowery dives, swan beds, white slavery and hoodlumism were spoofs even in 1928, but the cynicism of the play and its star made "Diamond Lil" rather pleasantly naughty. On the strength of one of the curtain lines, "Come up and see me some time," Hollywood asked Miss West to come out and teach the movie how to get away with the single entendre instead of the double entendre. She went and taught.

Now she is back to instruct another generation of playgoers, and she doesn't look or act a day older or better. Saturday evening's premiere in W. 49th St. was an event, with a platoon of cops keeping a big gallery of gawkers across the street. Miss West was hot—much hotter than she was 20 years ago.

Lot of Competition.

On the evening of April 9, 1928, "Diamond Lil" didn't even get the second-string reviewers, or the third-stringers; it got theatre-loving reporters off the city desks, including me, who were eager to see anything on a pair of passes.

Much more important premieres were taking place that night, and the big critics had their choice of the following: Molnar's "The Play's the Thing," with Holbrook Blinn; "The Greenwich Village Follies," with Grace La Rue, Dr. Rockwell and Jans & Whalen; the Theatre Guild's "Volpone," with Alfred Lunt, Dudley Digges, Ernest Cossart, Henry Travers and Helen Westley; a revival of "The Countess Maritza," with Odette Myrtil; a revival of "The Outsider," with Lionel Atwill, and Maxwell Anderson's comedy, "Saturday's Children," with Frederick Perry, Ruth Gordon and Humphrey Bogart.

Those were the nights when we really did have openings, and in the face of such competition Miss West had to claw her way up. Claw she did.

There is a delightful honky-tonk quality to the new production of "Diamond Lil." Under the wise and humorous direction of Charles K. Freeman, the big company of politicians, molls, touts, cutpurses, shoplifters, white slavers, drunks, hopheads, singing waiters and a detective disguised as a Salvation Army captain play their extravagant roles straight. Paul Du Pont's Gay Nineties costumes and the sets by William De Forest and Ben Edwards are just right for a romp in the underworld.

Miss West never misses a trick. Now, even, there is a song-and-dance interlude featuring Mae chanting "Frankie and Johnny" and other ballads. It's a-clambake with plenty of beer, and among those amiably helping to serve the tasty mess are Steve Cochran, Richard Coogan, Miriam Goldina, Charles G. Martin, Sheila Trent and Jeff Morrow. Two members of the original company, Jack Howard and Louis Nusbaum, are back in their roles.

'DIAMOND LIL'

Play by Mae West; staged by Charles K. Freeman; settings by William De Forest and Ben Edwards; costumes by Paul DuPont; presented by Albert H. Rosen and Herbert J. Freezer at the Coronet Theatre, February 5, 1949. The cast:

Jim	Billy Van
Bill	Jack Howard
Porter	James Quinn
Ragtime	Dick Arnold
Spike	George Warren
Jerry	Harry Warren
Kitty	Harriet Nelson
Frances	Sheila Trent
Flo	Sylvia Syms
Maggie	Louise Jenkins
Flynn	Charles G. Martin
Kane	Mike Keene
Gus Jordan	Walter Petrie
Sally	Frances Arons
Rita	Miriam Goldina
Juares	Steve Cochran
Mike	James Fallon
Diamond Lil	Mae West
Charlie	Peter Chan
Bessie	Buddy Millette
Violet	Margaret Magennis
Barbara	Marilyn Lowe
Capt. Cummings	Richard Coogan
Pete the Duke	Lester Laurence
Doheney	Ralph Chambers
Jacobson	Louis Nussbaum
Chick Clark	Jeff Morrow
Sailor	Jerry Tobias
Cop	F. Ben Miller
Singer	Michael Edwards
Miss West's Accompanist	David Lapin

"Diamond Lil"—*continued*

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

FEBRUARY 7, 1949

By HOWARD BARNES

Personal Triumph

THE preposterous Mae West, who discovered that sex can be both vulgar and funny, is reviving "Diamond Lil," at the Coronet Theater. She has changed scarcely at all during the two decades since she first celebrated sin with an undulant walk, a nasal innuendo and suggestive gestures. Her play is as feeble as it was in the first place, but her performance is in a class by itself. Her delivery of the celebrated line: "Come up and see me some time," is as magnificently ribald as some of us graybeards, who saw the original production, remember. Whenever she is on stage, the show is amusing, bawdy and nostalgic.

* * *

There is no known yardstick for measuring Miss West's particular performing. As in 1928, she takes over the paltry proceedings of "Diamond Lil" by a mere flick of the wrist, a line which sounds as though it might have really originated in the Bowery of the '90s, or a generally cynical attitude toward the male sex and conventions. She can be outrageous without ever actually relying on the more sordid aspects of physical love. Moreover, she wears flamboyant costumes with stylish arrogance and sings a number of songs when a sagging script demands an interval of vaudeville.

* * *

After twenty years, her current appearance at the Coronet is a very personal triumph. Although she has surrounded herself with a large and willing company, including the fast-stepping Billy Van, and Peter Chan, who sings an old Chinese song, which turns out to be "My Wild Irish Rose," she gives impetus to a rather ridiculous antique. Her contemptuous disposal of a white-slaver who tries to knife her, or her faltering steps toward religion, inspired by a Salvation Army captain, who turns out to be a vice squad detective, make for the substance of this latter-day offering of a comic melodrama.

* * *

Richard Coogan plays the cop in disguise with just the proper stiffness to match the star's buxom seductions. Steve Cochran, Walter Petrie and Charles G. Martin are some of the men who make Lil's life exciting and Miriam Goldina is tough and strident, as the white slaver who gets her just desserts. Charles K. Freeman has directed the production as jauntily as might have been expected with the material at hand and the settings by William De Forest and Ben Edwards, and the costumes by Paul Du Pont are colorful. "Diamond Lil" is a singularly dated theatrical museum piece, made intermittently beguiling by Miss West.

The New York Times

FEBRUARY 7, 1949

Mae West Back in Town as 'Diamond Lil'

Gallantly supported by four or five handsome, muscular leading men, Mae West has brought "Diamond Lil" back to New York, where it began its renowned career twenty-one years ago. She wriggled through it at the Coronet on Saturday evening, attired in some of the gaudiest finery of the century — the *femme fatale* of the Bowery, bowling her leading men over one by one with her classical impersonation of a story-book strumpet.

When Miss West restored her study of society to America last November, a bus-load of the Broadway night-watch rolled out to Montclair to pay their respects to her artistry. It must be confessed that "Diamond Lil" is a tough play to see twice in one season. Any fairly observant theatregoer can penetrate its subtleties with a single visit. It does not take long to understand what Miss West has in mind.

* * *

But she is a fabulous performer and her saloon singer is an incredible creation—a triumph of nostalgic vulgarity. She is always in motion. The snaky walk, the torso wriggle, the stealthy eyes, the frozen smile, the flat, condescending voice, the queenly gestures—these are studies in slow motion, and they have to be seen to be believed. Lazy, confident of her charms, Diamond Lil does not move fast, but she never stands still; and Miss West paces her performance accordingly.

There is an attitude of sublime fatalism about the whole business. Miss West extends her hand to be kissed with royal assurance. Even in the clinches she is monumentally disinterested, and she concludes her love scenes with a devastating wise-crack before they are started. Although Miss West is the goddess of sex, it might reasonably be argued that she scrupulously keeps sex out of her acting by invariably withdrawing from anything but the briefest encounters. "Diamond Lil" is a play about the world of sex, but there is very little sex in it.

* * *

Like an old dime novel, it is full of crime, drink and iniquity. After beating about the bush for two sluggish acts, it settles down hospitably into an old-fashioned vaudeville show in the last act; and Miss West, billowy and swaying at the piano, sings a few sinful ballads in a small voice but with plenty of style. It is performing in the grand manner.

After thoughtfully studying her performance twice in a little over two months, this reviewer is still puzzled over one thing. Is Miss West serious or is she kidding? Not that it matters. She is obviously a good trouper, which is probably the reason she has been able to hold this ramshackle melodrama together for twenty-one years.

B. A.

New York World-Telegram

FEBRUARY 7, 1949

'Diamond Lil' Brings West for the Wicked

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

That indisputable queen of innuendo and carefully aimed abandon, Mae West, who else? has brought "Diamond Lil" back to Broadway just a couple of months too soon to have it mark the 30th anniversary of her original appearance here in the show.

Never has anyone been so unstaled by undemesticated custom. Her gestures, her walk, her speech are all just as impudent as ever. With the broadest frankness of intention, she skirts the salacious and makes bums of the evil minded.

Mae is no girl to be feared by the passage of a couple of decades. If anything, she is sleeker if just as curvaceous as she was when "Diamond Lil" first became her trademark, or rather Mae became Lil's.

The star is a phenomenal perambulator, negotiating the stage with hinges between her vertebrae in a manner that makes strip teasers look like snowmen.

Toward the end of the third act, she comes down to the footlights and lets go with songs which, if Saturday night's audience had its way, she would still be singing. Her theory is "give it to 'em good," and she does with "Frankie and Johnnie," "Come Up and See Me Some Time" and her own all-out version of "After You've Gone."

Miss West is a true phenomenon, and certainly for her day, which looks hardly past noon yet, is one of the wonders of the world. She can take the simplest monosyllabic speech and give it a universe of meaning, with a lack of demureness that makes your eyes roll back in your head, and humor sharp as a stiletto.

Filled With Corn.

The play is actually so corny that soap operas seem classic by comparison. It is full of white slaving, shoplifting, murder and hidden identity. And through it all there undulates the dominant figure of Lil, who chalks up a night's work by the weight of her new diamonds.

For all this travesty, Miss West is basically a wise woman of the theater. She has her tricks perfected, but she knows when and where to attract attention. With no more difficulty than breathing, she could take every scene away from her cast. But when she is not talking, she has a composure many more solemn actors could emulate profitably, and beyond that, she watches and listens to the people around her.

There is never a moment when you do not wish she would talk and walk or sing more. And the payoff, of course, is that you leave the theater planning to come right back for more. Miss West is reported to have made several millions out of variations on the role of Lil. I hope she has, because she deserves every one of them.

Journal American

FEBRUARY 7, 1949

By ROBERT GARLAND

Wins Audience

By now, Mae West's twenty-years-after reproduction of "Diamond Lil" must be familiar to even an infrequent follower of this theatre-struck first-nighter. I wrote it up, not down, when it got itself together recently in New Jersey. Miss West herself was further glorified on a not too distant Sunday.

Now, both it (the play) and she (the star) are safe on Broadway. They ("Diamond Lil" and her impersonator) had one of the season's most unpredictable opening audiences to deal with Saturday at the Coronet. In my part of the auditorium, they either adored the setup or paid no noticeable attention to it.

Miss West is no little lady to let an audience get away from her. So, by the powers of will and showmanship, she fed them "Diamond Lil." She made them love it. At the final curtain fall she was thanking them with grace and condescension. Her speech topped off an all-Westonian evening.

Nowadays, Mae West is kidding her kind of sex more than she used to. And, thanks to her mockery, "Diamond Lil" is more entertaining. Her entire cast kids in her chosen key. Especially Steve Cochran, Richard Coogan and Billy Van. Confidentially, Mae still slinks. As a slinker, she is wonderful.

New York Post
HOME NEWS

FEBRUARY 7, 1949

A Famous Institution Returns for a Visit

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

At the Coronet Theatre Saturday night, the national institution called Mae West again invited that handsome Salvation Army Captain (actually the dreaded secret service operative known as the Hawk) to come up and see her some time and once more advised him that she wasn't ice. For the information of any weekend visitor who may have dropped in from Mars, it may be necessary to explain that this means Miss West has come back to town in her celebrated vehicle, "Diamond Lil," and is to be found putting sex back into its foolish place.

The rejoicing among the fabulous lady's devotees will have to be described as terrific. In the ranks of the assembled admirers there were some veteran playgoers who had seen "Diamond Lil" when it opened in 1928, but most of the audience seemed to belong to a new generation that was encountering Miss West for the first time. It is obvious that these newcomers were suitably impressed. All their heroine had to do was wriggle a bit and tell one of her squadron of leading men that she was pleased to meet him to have the first-nighters squealing with joy.

Cartoon

If you wanted to be academic about it, you would have to admit that "Diamond Lil" was one of the silliest and most dilapidated plays ever written, but that obviously is a matter of no importance. The vital thing is that it is a work which gives Miss West an opportunity to writhe and undulate and talk insinuatingly through her nose to her heart's content, and, what is even more to the point, to the content of her audience. The famous fictional character that is Mae West is properly exhibited in a full-length cartoon.

There was an innocent time when it was suspected by the puritanical that there was something rather sinister about the whole display. In at least this respect we are far wiser, today. It may be too much to say that Miss West is one of the great moral influences of her epoch, but she is most certainly on the side of the angels. Once she has finished her devastating burlesque of the romantic glories of illicit sex, there isn't much left of the sentimental tradition in such matters to be taken seriously.

Melodrama

Nothing could make this crazy tale of the gaslit melodrama of New York night life in the nineties, with its white slave trade and its dope runners, either believable or dramatically arresting. But the production accorded it has improved considerably since its shoddy performance in Montclair a couple of months ago. Even the four leading men, as impersonated by Richard Coogan, Steve Cochran, Charles G. Martin and Jeff Morrow, manage to have a certain amount of life of their own, which is an achievement in such a vehicle.

If description were necessary, "Diamond Lil" could be set down as the sort of play in which all the characters keep telling Miss West how beautiful and fascinating she is when she is on stage and go on describing her beauty and fascination to each other while she is changing costumes. That is the real cream of the work's jest. It makes it all the funnier when she sets out to give her devastating parody of glamour. Mae West is one of the famous comic legends of our time, and, in "Diamond Lil," you can see why.

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Mae West Still Sparkles In 'Diamond Lil' Role

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Albert H. Rosen and Herbert J. Freezer brought Mae West's revival of "Diamond Lil" to the Coronet Theatre Saturday night for a limited run. As you may have read in these columns, Miss West's production set a new house record at the Montclair (N. J.) Theatre and then piled up big grosses on a brief tour of the East.

"Diamond Lil" is no great shakes of a play, but it is an excellent vehicle for the display of Miss West's amazing talents. As those of you who have seen this play in the past recall, it is a melange of comedy, melodrama and nostalgia. It runs the gamut from laughs to murder.

It offers Miss West the opportunity to play a tough gal with a heart of gold, a strongbox full of sparklers and an irresistible lure for men. It also gives her the chance to sing some of the ditties she used to stop shows on the Keith-Albee Circuit of fond memory. A young lad from Cincinnati, who later rose to fame as Harry Richman, was her accompanist then.

Mae West is in a class by herself. There is no one in the theatre today comparable to her. She has authority, vitality and a method of theatrical projection that is unique. She can take hokum and make it glitter like gold. Unlike the frustrated alchemists of yore, she has mastered the science of turning corn into gold.

No player in recent seasons has received an ovation such as was given Miss West on her entrance Saturday night. The audience went wild and cheered for several minutes. And the customers kept blistering their palms throughout the evening. They really went to town when she gave out with such chansons as "Come Up and See Me Sometime," "Frankie and Johnnie" and "After You're Gone."

After witnessing Miss West's magic touch at the Montclair and Coronet, this reporter is still fascinated by the West technique. She gives a truly brilliant performance. She makes what in other hands might seem offensive, amusing. It is remarkable to watch sedate dowagers roar and applaud at material that in less gifted hands would make them turn up their aristocratic noses.

Assisting Miss West in her picaresque frolic are Steve Cochran, Richard Coogan, Charles G. Martin, Walter Petrie, Miriam Goldina, Mike Keene, Billy Van, Louis Nussbaum, Sylvia Syms, Jack Howard and a host of other players.

Oh yes, Miss West seems to have found the formula that Ponce de Leon sought in vain. She looks younger today than she did in the glory days of the good old Palace.